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**Marine Fisheries Advisory**

**MARINEFISHERIES ANNOUNCES CONDITIONAL RE-OPENING OF  
MERRIMACK RIVER CLAM FLATS**

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Following completion of a long term sanitary survey, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (*Marine Fisheries*) is pleased to announce the reclassification of 534-acres along the Merrimack River estuary to the conditional harvest of soft-shell clams. Once considered among the top five clam producing areas in Massachusetts, bacterial contamination had shut down highly productive beds in the communities of Newbury and Newburyport for 18 years; Salisbury has not supported an active shellfishery for 54 years. Actual harvesting will not begin until *Marine Fisheries* works out specifics of a management plan in cooperation with each community.

Survey results demonstrate that rainfall causes intermittent and predictable episodes of gross bacterial pollution. Resultant runoff from rain produces a sharp increase in *fecal coliform* bacteria in shellfish growing area waters. Accordingly, areas will be closed to shellfishing for 5 and 7 days after ¼ inch rain or more. Rainfalls of 1½ inches or more will prohibit shellfishing for extended periods. These shellfish flats will be reopened only after a follow-up water quality assessment.

Specially licensed diggers may harvest soft-shell clams for depuration (purification) at the Marine Fisheries Shellfish Purification Plant on Plum Island in Newburyport. Under strict laboratory monitoring and oversight, clams purge themselves of moderate amounts of bacteria in clean seawater in a controlled process until safe for food purposes. Unfortunately, recreational harvesting for direct human consumption will not be allowed due to the moderate levels of bacterial contamination, even during dry weather periods.

The Shellfish Purification Plant at Plum Island has been in operation since 1930 and now processes an average of 25,000 bushels of soft-shell clams annually, operating 7 days a week, 364 days a year. The plant was constructed originally by the City of Newburyport to purify clams from the Merrimack River, once considered one of the nation's ten most polluted rivers. In 1960, the City turned over operation of the plant to *Marine Fisheries*, where it now purifies clams from select conditionally restricted areas of Boston Harbor.

Today's announcement is made possible only by the concerted clean-up efforts begun over twenty years ago by federal, state, and county agencies together with local communities and environmental organizations. Cooperating agencies, organizations and communities include the Environmental Protection Agency, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management, Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, Merrimack River Watershed Council, and the communities of Newbury, Newburyport and Salisbury.